Perception as Controlled Dreaming: A Three-State Model of Consciousness

Abstract

This paper proposes the Controlled Dreaming Theory as an intuitive alternative to the popular "controlled hallucination" model of perception. We argue that all forms of perception can be understood as variations of a single generative process — dreaming — differing primarily in the degree of sensory control.

The theory identifies three core states: (1) uncontrolled dreaming during sleep, when sensory constraints are largely absent; (2) controlled dreaming during normal wakefulness, when sensory input continuously constrains and corrects the brain's internal generation of experience; and (3) hallucination, which occurs when uncontrolled dreaming intrudes into wakefulness due to a failure of sensory control.

This framework offers a clearer, more unified, and more accessible understanding of the relationship between waking perception, dreaming, and hallucination than existing models.

Introduction

Contemporary neuroscience increasingly views perception as an active constructive process rather than a passive reception of sensory data. A prominent expression of this view is Anil Seth's claim that perception is a form of "controlled hallucination" (Seth, 2017). While influential, this terminology has proven confusing for many readers.

This paper presents an alternative framework — the Controlled Dreaming Theory — which proposes that all conscious experience is fundamentally a form of dreaming, differing only in the degree to which it is regulated by sensory input.

The Controlled Dreaming Theory

The brain is a generative system that actively constructs our experience of reality. We propose that this generative activity is best conceptualized as dreaming. The distinction between different states of consciousness lies in the strength of sensory control over this process.

Sleep Dreaming (Uncontrolled Dreaming)

During sleep, particularly REM sleep, sensory input is heavily suppressed. The brain's generative process operates with minimal external constraint, producing the fluid and often bizarre experiences characteristic of dreams.

Normal Awake Perception (Controlled Dreaming)

In the waking state, sensory systems remain active and continuously modulate the brain's internal predictions. This tight sensory control results in stable and accurate perception of the external world.

Hallucination (Loss of Control)

Hallucinations arise when the generative process escapes normal sensory control while the individual is awake. Internally generated experiences then appear without appropriate correspondence to external reality.

Comparison with Existing Theories

Stephen LaBerge previously argued that “perception is dreaming constrained by sensory input, while dreaming is perception unconstrained by sensory input.” The current theory extends this idea by explicitly incorporating hallucination as a third state resulting from a loss of sensory control during wakefulness.

Anil Seth’s description of perception as controlled hallucination (Seth, 2017), while groundbreaking, has been widely misunderstood. The Controlled Dreaming Theory preserves the insight that perception is generative while using more intuitive language.

Andy Clark’s predictive processing framework (Clark, 2013) offers a detailed mechanistic account of how the brain minimizes prediction error. The Controlled Dreaming Theory complements this work by providing a broader, more accessible conceptual structure.

Conclusion

The Controlled Dreaming Theory proposes that we are always dreaming. Normal waking perception is dreaming under tight sensory control. When that control is removed, the result is either sleep dreaming or hallucination. This simple yet powerful idea offers a unified and intuitive framework for understanding the nature of conscious experience.

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